Towards an analytical livelihoods perspective in critical development research

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Abstract: By the early 2000s, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach/Framework (SLA or SLF) had emerged as a promising and challenging re-orientation of development research and practice. It also inspired our own research, launched around 2002, in the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, a research partnership network linking research organisations in the South and Switzerland. The present article reflects on roughly eight years of insights gained into this livelihoods focus. It shows that the framework was initially a crucial facilitator of research cooperation across various disciplines, and that it provided, for example, students at the PhD and Master's levels with a guided approach to analysing the 'real-life' problems and opportunities of rural people. Accordingly, the SLF was partly perceived as a new 'theory' of rural change and development. Gradually, however, we realised that its strength was limited to a kind of checklist for people-centred studies, with an inherent risk of leading to rather encyclopaedic listings of quantitative and/or qualitative data. Thorough debates among researchers involved were instrumental in revising the framework. The outcome was that the SLF indeed helped to focus research on core livelihood issues, but that (i) it is not an analytical framework which, on its own, makes it possible for researchers to grasp the complexity of interrelationships constituting livelihood realities; and that (ii) normatively, it tends to support a specific understanding of rural development along more neo-liberal lines. For a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by people, much more thorough theorising is required, as well as interlinkages with ongoing debates in the social sciences, parallel to – but separate from – the 'development-oriented livelihoods community'. This specifically concerns theories dealing with power, inequality, and everyday social practices. Such re-theorising leads to a challenging livelihoods perspective in critical development studies.

12 Towards an Analytical Livelihoods Perspective in Critical Development Research

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Abstract

By the early 2000s, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach/Framework (SLA or SLF) had emerged as a promising and challenging re-orientation of development research and practice. It also inspired our own research, launched around 2002, in the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, a research partnership network linking research organisations in the South and Switzerland. The present article reflects on roughly eight years of insights gained into this livelihoods focus. It shows that the framework was initially a crucial facilitator of research cooperation across various disciplines, and that it provided, for example, students at the PhD and Master's levels with a guided approach to analysing the 'real-life' problems and opportunities of rural people. Accordingly, the SLF was partly perceived as a new 'theory' of rural change and development. Gradually, however, we realised that its strength was limited to a kind of checklist for people-centred studies, with an inherent risk of leading to rather encyclopaedic listings of quantitative and/or qualitative data. Thorough debates among researchers involved were instrumental in revising the framework. The outcome was that the SLF indeed helped to focus research on core livelihood issues, but that (i) it is not an analytical framework which, on its own, makes it possible for researchers to grasp the complexity of interrelationships constituting livelihood realities; and that (ii) normatively, it tends to support a specific understanding of rural development along more neo-liberal lines. For a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by people, much more thorough theorising is required, as well as interlinkages with ongoing debates in the social sciences, parallel to – but separate from – the 'development-oriented livelihoods community'. This specifically concerns theories dealing with power, inequality, and everyday social practices. Such re-theorising leads to a challenging livelihoods perspective in critical development studies.

Keywords: Livelihoods; institutions; power relations; critical development studies; theory-led empirical research; South Asia; Central Asia.

12.1 The promises of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

The 'lost decade' and the 'development impasse' were important development markers of the late 1980s and early 1990s – the first referring to the challenges faced by development practice in overcoming poverty, and the second referring to the problems encountered in research that seeks to explain underdevelopment. As Booth (1994, p 5) observed, both strands dominant in research at that time (modernisation theory and neo-Marxist analysis) were characterised by their search for globally valid explanations which, however, resulted in "grand simplifications […] that were either simply wrong […] or else pitched at a level of generality that made them irrelevant to the most important practical issues facing developing countries". While development practice continued to be dominated by the Washington Consensus, new research perspectives began to emerge in response to the 'impasse', focusing on the "actual workings, as distinct from the formal objectives of abstract representation, of key development processes" (Booth 1994, p 11). These frequently actor-oriented studies (e.g. Chambers and Conway 1992; Long and Long 1992) "revealed the important extent to which changes in the well-being of rural people are the result of complex interactions between individuals and groups endowed with different and changing amounts of knowledge and power" (Booth 1994, p 11). In a slightly different vein, Political Ecology studies shifted their structural neo-Marxist gaze to give more attention to local complexities (e.g. Peet and Watts 1996). New insights into diversity and agency were also gained in some areas of development practice, for example by way of Farming Systems Research (Byerlee et al 1982), Agro-Ecosystems Analysis (Conway 1985), or on a more methodological level using Participatory Rural Assessments (PRAs) (e.g. Chambers 1992).[6]

Though still marginal in the mid-1990s, these approaches gained enormous popularity in the context of growing dissatisfaction with neo-liberal development strategies. A core supportive event was the *White Paper on Development Cooperation* by Britain's new Labour Government in 1997 (DFID 1997), which explicitly announced a refocus on assistance to 'the poor': "We will do this through support for international sustainable development targets and policies which create *sustainable livelihoods* for poor people, promote human development and conserve the environment" (p 6, emphasis by authors of this article). This new policy approach was to be implemented by the British Department for International Development (DFID), leading around 2000 to the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF, or SLA, for

Sustainable Livelihoods Approach).[7] Introducing a well-designed graphic illustration, the framework emphasises the need to analyse interlinkages between assets (represented as an asset pentagon), livelihood strategies, and the respective outcomes – processes that are mediated through "transforming structures and processes" (renamed later as "policy, institutions, and processes", or PIP) and embedded in a "vulnerability context".[8] Indeed, this graphic illustration (and to a lesser degree the large amount of written explanations) was addressed to a development audience in practice and to researchers eager to learn more about people's real challenges and to design more appropriate strategies of aid and support.

12.2 Working with the SLF

Research within the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South started precisely at this time in 2002. Having to tackle the challenges of an inter- and transdisciplinary research venture, being positioned at the interface between development research and practice, and having a focus on rural poverty, NCCR North-South researchers perceived the (brand-new) SLF as an exciting entry point. More or less on the basis of the DFID concept, they wrote a paper to inform researchers involved (Kollmair and Gamper 2002) and offered introductory training to prospective students at the PhD and Master's levels. In addition, the framework's links to New Institutional Economics were made explicit (Haller 2002). A series of Master's theses and PhD dissertations were initiated; many of them took up the challenge (called for by the SLF) of holistic in-depth field research to analyse people's assets, livelihood strategies, the outcomes of these strategies, and the influence of the wider context.[9]

In retrospect, and for the purpose of a rough overview of their results, these studies can be positioned on a continuous scale. At one end of this scale we find studies that took the SLF as an explicit entry point, meaning they 'worked through it'. At the other end of the scale are studies that focused on livelihoods but whose research was more influenced by, and centred around, specific theoretical concepts from the social sciences. Between these two extremes are studies that worked to varying degrees with the SLF. From a temporal perspective, we observed a gradual shift of emphasis from a focus on the framework at the beginning of the NCCR North-South programme to guidance taken from social science theories. This goes along with a methodological shift from more quantitative to more qualitative research approach-

es, from the quantification of assets in 'asset pentagons' towards more in-depth analyses of certain aspects of livelihoods, such as intra-household power relations, the social significance of certain assets, or the importance of institutions and policies.

A good number of Master's studies were carried out working explicitly with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. Some Nepalese Master's students (supervised by B. Subedi of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu) dealt with the livelihood strategies of poor and marginal people in urban settings of Kathmandu Valley (street sweepers, cloth vendors, scavengers, street barbers, female tempo drivers, porters, etc.), while others focused on the livelihoods of migrants and the households they left behind, including internally displaced people, and on institutional arrangements of forest use. In northwest Pakistan, Master's students addressed participatory forest management and gendered access to livelihood assets. PhD dissertations with a more explicit application of the SLF included the studies by Shahbaz (2009) on participatory forest management in Pakistan and by Rajbanshi (2009) on livelihood patterns of marginal communities in peri-urban areas in Nepal. Taking livelihood strategies and the practices of internally displaced people in urban Kathmandu as an entry point, Ghimire (2010) adds the notions of "base", "space", and "orientation" from the Rural Livelihoods System framework (Baumgartner and Hoegger 2006), but also takes into consideration social theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984).

In addition, a specific study was done to enhance understanding of rural livelihoods in northwest Pakistan (Steimann 2005), showing the important role of labour migration in household livelihood strategies. Nair and colleagues (2008) researched water insecurity in Plachimada in Kerala, South India, to arrive at a more differentiated understanding of the water use conflicts that emerged over a private bottling plant (owned by Coca-Cola). Similarly, a study by Nair and colleagues (2007) highlighted the livelihood challenges faced by people in a panchayat of Wayanad district, Kerala, due to increased globalisation. Upreti and Müller-Böker (2010) examine the conceptual links between livelihood insecurity and social conflict in Nepalese society from a wide range of thematic perspectives. The contributions of Nepalese academic and non-academic scholars aim to test and criticise the usefulness and explanatory power of the different livelihoods approaches in their field of research or practical experience.

Other researchers made only partial use of the framework's terminology and of its dimensions. Their theoretical and methodological underpinnings were more heavily influenced by debates that emerged explicitly from social science theorising. Such studies include the PhD dissertation by Thieme (2006) on the life of Nepalese migrants in New Delhi. While taking the SLF as a starting point, this study mainly focused on social processes, using Bourdieu's understanding of social capital and social fields (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1986), which also formed the basis of a Master's thesis analysing the interlinkages between labour migration and pastoral livelihoods in rural Kyrgyzstan. This approach was then further refined in a comparative study, including findings from Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan (Thieme and Siegmann 2010). Geiser and Steimann (2004) investigated debates on the 'local state' (e.g. Fuller and Harriss 2001) to understand the importance of state actors' own livelihood concerns in the process of implementing development projects. Others used the concepts of 'endowment' and 'entitlements' (Leach et al 1999) to shed light on unequal access to livelihood assets (e.g. Shahbaz et al 2010). Last but not least, Steimann's (2010) research on the changing institutional context in Kyrgyzstan and how it is experienced and handled by pastoralists draws on theoretical debates concerning the recursive relationship between actors and institutions in post-socialist transformation as well as on theories about property rights.

12.3 A critical assessment of work with the SLF

All studies mentioned above produced very important insights into the everyday struggles of people (with an emphasis on rural settings) and how they are influenced by 'the wider context' (e.g. processes of globalisation, politics, development interventions). In addition, they provided interesting methodological experiences with the application of the SLF in research. In what follows, we discuss these insights by first highlighting some very specific strengths and weaknesses of the SLF, as encountered by the authors mentioned. This is then followed by a broader assessment of experiences and concludes with the formulation of four 'traps'.

Most of the researchers reported that the SLF helped them to approach their research themes with an open mind, giving attention to ground realities and 'what people really do' and 'what people really have'. It also allowed people from different disciplines to enter the subject of development studies, and opened up related fields of research. Often, assets and livelihood strategies

provided such entry points. In general, the core attributes of the framework – as summarised by Scoones (2009) – were lauded by the NCCR North-South research team as well, that is, its people-centred, holistic, dynamic approach (to understanding change and complex cause-and-effect relationships), its focus on strengths and needs, its attempts to bridge the gap between macro and micro levels, and finally its endeavour to address several dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, social, and institutional).

The researchers involved, however, also mentioned the difficulties they faced while working with the SLF. Such difficulties included, among other things, the often unclear issue of whether certain assets belong to individuals or households (Wyss 2003); the general usefulness of the asset pentagon beyond some rather simple illustration (Wyss 2003); the difficulty of dealing with 'social capital' methodologically and the realisation that social assets do not always represent positive capital (Thieme 2006); the difficulty in attributing certain social dimensions to the PIP box or the framework's 'vulnerability context' (Wyss 2003); a certain risk of the framework being power-blind and not sufficiently highlighting the need to address intra-household and gender disparities[10] (Kaspar 2004); the framework's overall complexity and rather narrow assessment of short-term livelihood interests vis-à-vis long-term impacts (e.g. environmental sustainability vs. economic assets; see Shahbaz 2009); or the emphasis on access to assets and its potential improvement, rather than on explanation of the causes of unequal access (Shahbaz et al 2010). Also, the SLF does not provide ways to incorporate historical aspects; based on past experiences, for example, some social groups may distrust certain institutional arrangements (Shahbaz 2009). Methodological problems arose because of the need to triangulate quantitative and qualitative research methods, and especially to identify significant indicators, for example on social capital, and to categorise heterogeneous households (Steimann 2005).

To sum up, the NCCR North-South provided a very inspiring platform to test the promises of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, and, as shown above, many researchers in the programme took up the challenge. Their reports on the strengths and weaknesses of the SLF stimulated an intensive exchange of experience throughout the programme, and especially during a joint workshop held in Kathmandu in late 2006 (Upreti et al 2007). These discussions highlighted that the SLF indeed challenges the still dominant modernisation discourse (based on structural-functionalist assumptions), which perceives poverty in countries of the South as caused primarily by

structural conditions, such as the prevalence of traditional subsistence-oriented production systems, lack of knowledge in facing the challenges posed by globalisation, or the preponderance of restrictive customary and communal norms and values. The SLF attempts to go beyond this pre-conceived and normative ontology by researching 'what poor people actually do', focusing on their daily practices and life experience to understand the conditions that support or hinder them in securing their livelihoods. Following this approach, NCCR North-South research helped to highlight the 'active' role of poor people – rather than portraying them as 'underdeveloped' in the first place. They very often struggle to gain access to resources required for a living, and often skilfully design livelihood strategies under constraints (see also the PhD dissertation by Strasser [2008] on such strategies by rubber smallholders in Kerala). However, many 'traditional' institutional norms or state-imposed regulations hinder them from achieving livelihood security (see also Shahbaz et al 2010). Research identified traditional power relations and the need to critically reflect on the dominant notion of community (e.g. Geiser and Müller-Böker 2003), but also showed the excluding consequences of the laws and the 'development programmes' of modern nation-states (e.g. Shahbaz 2009). Research results also shed light on people's active efforts to overcome these constraints – specifically through civil society organisations – such as endeavours to access state services or to modify state rules (e.g. Geiser 2006).

However, the discussions mentioned above also provided information on the weaknesses of the DFID-based approach. Being mainly designed for straightforward problem mitigation, it emphasises (largely along systems research and thus functionalist lines) poor people's assets and how these assets could be improved by outside interventions. This leads to a tendency to inventory assets and activities without exploring the causes of unequal access. We summarise these main constraints in terms of four 'traps':

The pentagon trap: Indeed, in many of the (early) livelihoods studies carried out within the NCCR North-South the asset pentagon attracted most attention, as it invited researchers to collect data. This, however, often led to a rather encyclopaedic listing of issues by means of pre-structured questionnaires and quantitative analysis, with less attention given to more open-ended curiosity and qualitative analysis that would help to understand the causes underlying the distribution of assets.

The PIP trap: The framework's 'box' of policies, institutions, and processes (PIP) compresses and jams together almost all of what is otherwise labelled as core social science dimensions with respect to understanding of societal processes. It is here that the lack of a clear conceptual focus and stringent arguing becomes most obvious. As a matter of fact, discussions were all too often diverted from these concerns to arguments about whether this or that social phenomenon could be labelled an 'institution', whether it represented an 'organisation' or something else, whether it should be part of PIP or the 'vulnerability context', etc.

The trap of the too-widely-open research question: The SLF invites us to analyse livelihood realities holistically. This is helpful in understanding the complexity of livelihoods. However, and in conjunction with a strong focus on assets, it bears the risk of researchers' losing sight of specific research questions, or becoming overburdened with the need for expertise in many different fields – which may again persuade many to concentrate on 'counting assets'.

The normative trap: This refers specifically to the role of the term "sustainable", which figures so prominently in the SLF title. The debates within our research group clearly showed that we often take the meaning of "sustainable" for granted, and that we often unconsciously judge livelihoods as "sustainable" or as "unsustainable". This carries the risk of passing judgement without having profound, transparent, and theory-based arguments. A normative issue is also linked with the SLF's notion of 'livelihood outcomes': The depiction of people's own views of poverty and/or well-being is an important aspect in understanding rural realities; however, this can bear the risk of overlooking the bigger (structural) issues – the window from where 'local people' see things might be small. On top of this, the above focus on locally perceived causes of poverty together with the researchers' focus on assets can indeed result in a serious neglect of wider issues of power.

12.4 Towards an analytical livelihoods perspective – and normative implications

Based on the insights gained by working with the DFID-inspired livelihoods approach for a considerable period of time, and the many discussions held within our research group, a shift in research approaches became obvious. Although there was acknowledgement of the livelihoods framework as a

highly suitable starting point for the integrated analysis of complex and dynamic local contexts, more and explicit attention was gradually given to institutional dimensions, and thus to core challenges and questions in the social sphere. Although some of the researchers had already embarked on this earlier, the focus gradually shifted *from assets to access, power, and entitlements*. As a matter of fact, it was the rather vague conceptualisation, especially of the framework's categories of social capital and the famous 'PIP box', that urgently required in-depth clarification and theorising. Examples of such theory-led empirical research which maintains a focus on livelihood realities include the more recent studies cited in section 12.2.

In summary, we argue that these conceptual developments gradually find their expression in *an analytical livelihoods perspective in critical development research*. This shift from a more mechanical *livelihoods framework* to a theorised *livelihoods perspective* includes, among other things, three main dimensions:

Focused research questions: This refers to the understanding of specific issues that impinge on the livelihood realities of the poor, such as migration, the role of agribusiness and related policies, or the effects of land reforms – beyond a more general and too 'holistic' (in the sense of encyclopaedic) review.

Focused conceptualisation and theorising: This is the central point, calling for reflection on the very basic analytical notions used in analysing livelihood realities. Examples include livelihood arenas, governance, context, or the changing role of the state. All these notions require a clear and transparent understanding and awareness of their meanings and their roots in social science debates. As mentioned above, realising that the SLF as promoted by the DFID is tantamount to a rather under-theorised checklist, some researchers began to address the enabling or restricting social and institutional context within which people construct their livelihoods, for example by referring to various structuration theories such as Giddens' agency-based approach (Giddens 1984) or Bourdieu's Theory of Practice with its notions of habitus, social field, and capitals (Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Dörfler et al 2003). Others concerned themselves with more recent strands of Political Economy (e.g. Bernstein and Byres 2001), or linked up with debates on 'the local state' (e.g. Leach et al 1999; Corbridge et al 2005).

Focused research methodology: This refers to the research procedures applied, that is, the shift in balance between quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as to gender sensitivity and ethical anchoring. By looking into how households interlink rural and urban livelihoods, the established rural–urban dichotomy is also challenged, and concepts that consider the multi-locality and transnational linkages of households are applied and further developed (e.g. Thieme 2008a, 2008b). As a matter of fact, striking an adequate balance between quantitative and qualitative methods remains a challenge.

Policy recommendations and implications: Important debates finally emerged about the role of researchers in developing policy recommendations, along with the need to take a normative stance in this respect. Here, we realised (again) that the research approach selected impinges on the conclusions drawn from research. When applying the DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods Framework with an emphasis on assets and people's livelihood strategies, policy suggestions tend to emerge that advocate a strengthening of people's capabilities to overcome poverty. The framework thus risks further depoliticising the development agenda, in the sense that it diminishes emphasis on structural inequalities in access to resources or to assets. However, when greater attention is given to a critique of power relations and prevailing institutional structures that enable or hinder access to resources, structural dimensions enter into consideration as well, for example leading to critical policy debates about the role of the state or, at the micro level, about the power of local elites to force their ideas of local development upon others. Finally, this impinges on the criteria that are used to define livelihoods as 'sustainable', 'resilient', or 'vulnerable'. Instead of relying on too unspecific or even predefined normative concepts, we need to scrutinise our criteria, making them transparent and informed by the respective theoretical debates.

Endnotes

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[6] Owing to limitations of space, we have mentioned only a few important authors.

[7] For a detailed treatment of the history of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, see Scoones (2009) and Solesbury (2003).

[8] See the graphic illustration in DFID (2000).

[9] The present article concentrates on studies undertaken by the NCCR North-South in South Asia and Central Asia; for other studies with a livelihoods focus, see the programme's website at http://www.north-south.ch.

[10] Though the SLF did not explicitly conceptualise the gender dimension, the work of Siegmann and Sadaf (2006) suggests that its flexibility can be utilised to fit gender norms explicitly into the framework as part of the informal institutions that influence access to livelihood assets.

[11] For other important points, see De Haan and Zoomers (2005).

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